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# NJ Quality Single Accountability Continuum

Revised

William L. Librera, Ed.D.  
Commissioner

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**NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
**New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is proposing to implement a quality single accountability continuum to measure students, school districts and schools' performance in meeting state standards. This new system represents streamlined requirements to lessen administrative burden, as well as a comprehensive approach to assessing, evaluating, and monitoring school district performance that was begun several years ago.

The educational landscape has changed considerably as evidenced by a number of reform efforts, increased demand for accountability at all levels in the educational system, increased demand for academic gains in student academic achievement, the call for equitable treatment of all children, all schools, and uniform standards, as well as a system of rewards and sanctions.

A major goal of the department is to create an educational system where all students achieve proficiency in the Core Curriculum Content Standards and to ensure school districts and schools have support for quality teaching and learning. The primary tool for achieving this goal is the development of a system that recognizes successful schools, provides an early indication to struggling schools and provides technical assistance to improve quality and improve student achievement. In order to meet this goal, it is recognized that there are components of the existing multiple systems that must be maintained, integrated and aligned to improve efficiency. Furthermore, the structure and processes of a single accountability system must be streamlined, responsive and designed to address the varied needs of students and school districts. A new standard must be set for defining success, lack of progress with a revised differentiated technical assistance delivery system to support teaching and learning, as well as to improve the effectiveness of schools and districts.

The decision to adopt this more streamlined approach is determined by a number of factors such as: the need to focus on results, to maintain more thorough and frequently assessed indicators of performance and link accountability measures to instructional support.

The department's approach is to align the current multiple accountability systems into a single comprehensive system of accountability by streamlining and integrating these multiple systems into 5 key components governing school district effectiveness. The 5 key components are:

1. Instruction and Program
2. Personnel
3. Fiscal Management
4. Operations
5. Governance

This new system of accountability will have several benefits including streamlining the monitoring and review process, reducing paperwork, and enabling the NJDOE to incorporate diverse and innovative technical assistance resources and support for teaching and learning. Additionally, this new system of accountability will be cost neutral for the NJDOE.

Under this new system, the type and level of oversight and technical assistance and support envisioned can best be described as a performance continuum. At one end of the continuum is the recognition of those school districts that have demonstrated effective practices in all areas and meet all state standards, thus requiring no intervention. At the opposite end of the continuum, are those school districts that have consistently not met state standards, have not shown improvement after administrative and/or instructional remedies have been offered and implemented, warrant substantial improvement and require maximum intervention (partial or full state control) and the placement of a Highly Skilled Professional (HSP) to oversee one or more of those activities.

The role of the HSP will be critical to providing the necessary guidance to implement needed improvements as identified and bring about overall quality improvement. HSPs will come from a variety of sources including retired public and private sector professionals with a greater emphasis on "educators." While the HSP will solicit input and develop working partnerships with school district staff, the HSP will maintain authority in their area of oversight and will complement local authority in decision making. The HSP selected to assist the school district will depend upon the component(s) identified as being deficient and not meeting state standards. For example, if the district is having difficulty with fiscal issues, then the HSP selected would possess the knowledge and skills necessary to assist the school district staff and provide oversight in this area. Thus, a former school district business administrator may be chosen to fill

this position. The HSP may also choose to acquire the needed resources from a consulting firm specializing in school district finance. The HSP would serve as the lead professional charged with implementing change and ensuring compliance with state standards.

In between the two opposite ends of the continuum, are those districts that have not met some state standards or experienced deficiencies in one or more key components that warrant minimal intervention, (technical assistance or targeted assistance) of the identified component(s). Placement on the continuum would proceed from those districts that have demonstrated effective practices in all areas and have met all state standards which would receive no intervention, to those that have not met some state standards or have critical areas identified in one or more of the five key components of school district effectiveness that would be identified for placement in one of the following categories of intervention:

- No intervention
- Minimal Intervention (technical assistance or targeted assistance)
- Maximum intervention (partial state control or full state control)

Providing differentiated technical assistance to school districts will be based on the unique needs of the districts, as outlined in the conceptual framework document.

In summary, the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum Model is designed to strike a balance between oversight/compliance and technical assistance and support for teaching and learning through a two-look system: 1) early identification of struggling districts and 2) a more rigorous second look at district effectiveness. The department, having garnered information from prior field experiences and input and support from key educational constituency groups and professional associations, proposes to begin implementation of this system in September 2005.

**NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
**New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum**  
**(NJ QSAC)**

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

**INTRODUCTION**

The New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) system to monitor student progress and school performance is the overarching framework used for the development of a new comprehensive single system of accountability to achieve quality. This new system is designed to strike a balance between oversight and compliance, and technical assistance and support for teaching and learning and it represents an effort to streamline requirements, lessen administrative burden and maintain the provision of a comprehensive approach to assessing, evaluating, and monitoring school district performance that was begun several years ago.

A hallmark feature of this single accountability continuum to achieve quality is to assure that every student is afforded the opportunity to succeed.

Equally important is the shift in the state's focus from sole reliance on compliance with numerous district certifications to standards for recognizing or building competency and capacity on all levels to solve problems and demonstrate significant and steady improvement in student academic achievement and performance.

The department's work in this area is informed by (1) its recent intervention team efforts in local capacity building with troubled districts in the areas of governance, finance, planning and administration, and student achievement; (2) the working group on State Takeover Report of Recommendations to the Commissioner; (3) input and support from key educational constituency groups and professional associations; (4) prior field experiences; and (5) implementation of federal requirements governing accountability.

**BACKGROUND**

The existing structure and processes used to evaluate a school district's performance is based on a monitoring process that includes an annual review and a 7-year district board of education certification cycle with numerous levels of certification (i.e. Level I, II, III)

and various designations (group 1, 2, 3) at one end. At the other end of the existing system is full state control of a school district with insufficient criteria for return to local control. This process is complex in nature, and is composed of multiple sub-frames of accountability that include: (1) standards; (2) fiscal accountability; (3) facilities requirements; (4) state and federal program requirements (such as, monitoring, certificating programs, Abbott, federal reporting requirements); and (5) governance. The NJDOE intends to build upon the efficiencies in the existing method to determine a district board of education's certification and to streamline the annual monitoring process.

The primary tool of the existing system used to assess the status of a school district's performance on an annual basis is the Quality Assurance Annual Report (QAAR), that includes a checklist of 135 indicators. The vast majority of indicators are duplicative and no longer applicable, given the rapidly changing educational environment. Furthermore, the public demand for increased accountability for results has led to the inclusion of much of this information on the school's state report card.

Once performance is assessed in the existing system, the most extreme intervention is state takeover. The State Takeover Law enacted in 1987, directs the department to take over an entire school district's operations by replacing key decision-makers with a state-appointed district superintendent; and provide only "advisory powers" to the local board of education with no statutory provisions for: stages of assuming full state control; a discriminating approach to takeover portions of operations; targeting those districts most in need of improvement; and or providing state technical assistance or enhancing civic engagement. Additionally, the exit criteria for "takeover" districts to return to local control requires full certification based on state standards with no opportunity to concede authority back as performance warrants.

In addition, the monitoring indicators upon which return to local control is based are not aligned with Abbott mandates and new federal reporting requirements. The department recognized that if the return to local control is ever to be realized in the three state-operated districts, indicators of performance (district, school, students) must be more thorough, and assessed more frequently than those vis-à-vis the current state monitoring system.

In 2001, Commissioner Hespe appointed a working group led by Rutgers University professors Tractenberg, Sadovnik, and Holtzer to review the existing statute governing full state control takeover of low-capacity districts and to make recommendations that

would strengthen state intervention efforts and provide for a transition of state-operated districts to local control. These recommendations as well as a process for reestablishing local control are outlined in the Working Group on State Takeover Report to the Commissioner. The adoption and implementation of these recommendations will require revision to the State Takeover Law.

At present, the department operates with different accountability systems. They are: state monitoring, Abbott, fiscal and full state control. With the new federal requirements, a fifth system could easily be added. Instead of multiple accountability systems, the department seeks to create a comprehensive single accountability system to achieve quality--that is focused on results and does not make conflicting demands on districts and schools.

## **APPROACH FOR EVALUATION OF DISTRICTS**

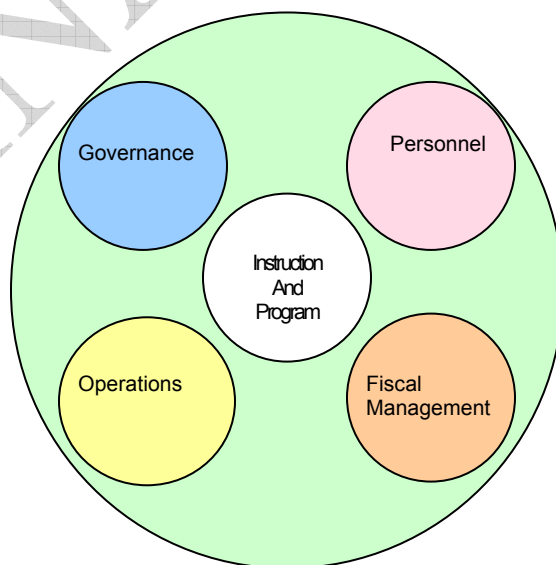
### **Overview of Continuum**

The department's approach to the evaluation of districts is to align the current multiple sub-frames into a single comprehensive system of accountability by streamlining and integrating these sub-frames into 5 key components governing school district effectiveness in an effort to lessen administrative burden (see figure 1). They are:

1. Instruction and Program
2. Operations
3. Fiscal Management
4. Personnel
5. Governance

### **NJ QSAC Components of School District Effectiveness**

**Figure 1**



The New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJ QSAC) is a model designed to strike a balance between oversight/compliance and technical assistance and support for teaching and learning through a two look system: 1) early identification of struggling districts/schools; and 2) a more rigorous second look at district effectiveness. The department, having garnered information from prior field experiences and input and support from key educational constituency groups and professional associations, proposes to begin implementation of this system in September 2005.

The type and level of oversight and technical assistance and support envisioned can best be described as a performance continuum (see Attachment A – NJ QSAC Categories of Performance and Attachment B - Categories of Intervention Chart). At one end of the continuum is the recognition of those school districts that have demonstrated effective practices in all areas and meet all state standards, thus requiring no intervention. At the opposite end of the continuum, are those school districts that have consistently not met state standards, have not shown improvement after administrative and/or instructional remedies have been offered and implemented, warrant substantial improvement, and require maximum intervention (partial or full state control) and the placement of a highly skilled professional (HSP) to oversee one or more of those activities. The role of the HSP in this system will be critical to providing direct oversight needed to ensure the implementation of activities, including corrective action strategies in an effort to bring about overall quality improvement.

In between the two opposite ends of the continuum, are those districts that have not met some state standards or experienced deficiencies in one or more key components that warrant minimal intervention, (technical assistance or targeted assistance) of the identified component(s).

### **NJ QSAC Evaluation Process of Districts**

Annually, all school districts will continue to receive an initial review of performance data via desk audits and review of student academic performance.

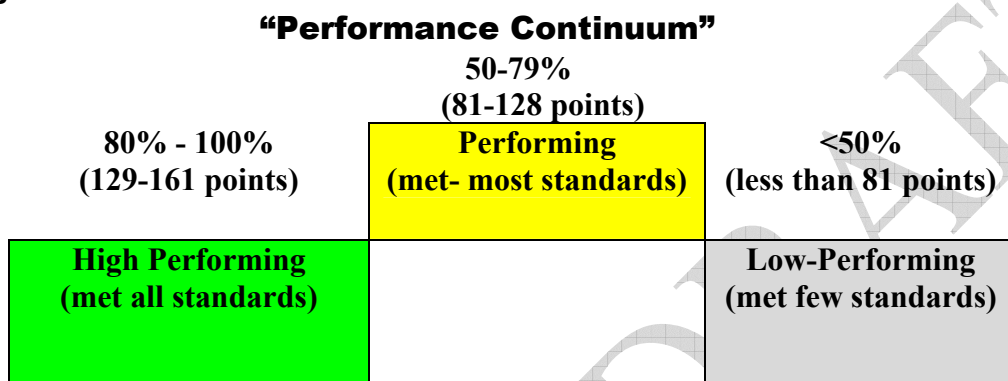
This review will consist of an evaluation of the school districts based on the completion of the Checklist of School District Effectiveness (see Attachment C). This review tool contains 16 primary and 13 secondary quality performance indicators of school district effectiveness. The quality indicators are comprised of standards for each of the five key components of school district effectiveness: 1) Instruction and Program; 2) Personnel; 3) Fiscal Management; 4) Operations; and 5) Governance. While all of the indicators are



important, the primary indicators are weighted higher (60%) because they are mandated by federal and/or state regulations. Similarly, the secondary indicators, while determined to be essential criteria, may not be required by federal/state mandates and thus receive a lower weight value compared to the primary indicators (40%).

Conversion of the raw scores from the Checklist of School District Effectiveness to the NJ QSAC Performance Continuum ratings will determine the placement of school districts on the continuum and will determine the level of intervention to each district. The levels of the Performance Continuum are identified in Figure 2 below:

**Figure 2**



To ensure a completely effective system, all of the evaluating criteria should be adhered to on a continuous basis.

A school district that has successfully met all of the state standards as indicated by the quality indicators, will **not** have to undergo any further reviews. These districts will be considered high-performing districts that have received a score of 80% - 100% on the performance continuum. These districts will complete a Statement of Assurance (Attachment D) attesting to the accuracy in reporting and meeting the federal and state requirements indicated and then it will be issued a letter of recognition generated by the department. The review process for these districts will commence the following year. No further intervention from the NJDOE will be required. School districts that do not meet all of the state standards identified from the initial review will be considered performing (scoring 50% - 79%) and will warrant minimal intervention. Based on the findings, NJDOE personnel may determine that technical assistance or targeted assistance may be warranted in specific areas to assist the district in meeting state standards. However, if the findings indicate that further review is warranted, a deeper review will be conducted and an improvement plan will be required.

This improvement plan must also be approved by the NJDOE in order for the school district to progress towards meeting state standards. Upon approval of the improvement plan, the school district would begin implementation of this plan and will receive periodic review toward progress.

All school districts receiving a score of less than 50% on the performance continuum are considered low performing and will warrant maximum intervention, which can be either partial state control or full state control. Also, a HSP will be embedded in these districts to provide further assistance. The role of the HSP will be critical to providing direct oversight needed to ensure the development and implementation of activities including corrective action strategies. The HSP selected to assist the school district will depend upon the component(s) identified as being deficient and not meeting state standards. This professional would assist in the deployment of the necessary resources to the school district. For example, if the district is having difficulty with fiscal issues, then the HSP selected would possess the knowledge and skills or be able to facilitate acquiring the resources needed to assist the school district staff and provide oversight in this area. Thus, a former school district business administrator may be chosen to fill this position. HSPs will be professionals with predominantly educational backgrounds who will assist districts and the Department of Education in developing and implementing corrective action strategies related to the indicators on the accountability continuum during various stages of intervention.

The seven-year certification process for school districts will remain intact. NJ QSAC allows for early intervention through technical assistance, targeted assistance or the introduction of a HSP. These elements are designed to compliment the district certification process. Districts will be certified for seven years however, during the annual review, any serious or egregious problems that arise in meeting the quality performance indicators can warrant rescinding a certification. The department will closely monitor district effectiveness and provide the appropriate level of intervention early in the process to avoid rescinding certification.

The HSP will assist school districts in partial state control and those under full state control. Dependent upon the key component areas not in compliance with state standards, the NJDOE will make the determination of whether the school district will proceed to partial state control or go directly into full state control.

HSPs will come from a variety of sources including NJDOE partnerships, other school districts showing evidence of best practices, professional organizations and individual experts from the private sector. This professional would be a broker or coordinator of

services to obtain and deploy the necessary resources to the school district. While the HSP will solicit input and develop working partnerships with school district staff, the HSP will maintain authority in their area of oversight and will compliment local authority in decision making.

This professional corps will be primarily experienced educators in New Jersey, although some people may have desirable experience in another state. On a limited basis, there will also be HSPs who may come from the private sector or from other areas of the public sector where their experience in areas such as Planning and Administration, Personnel and/or Facilities may be needed. It is expected that HSPs would fall into three basic categories:

### 1. Direct Hires

These would be professionals who are hired to be in the direct employ of the Department of Education just as other employees are recommended, approved and hired. There would be a posting, an advertisement, and an employment procedure, as well as a compensation scale consistent with other employees in the Department of Education. This would likely to be the smallest of the three categories of Highly Skilled Professionals as the role is intended to be for a short duration.

### 2. Sabbaticals

These professionals would come to the role of HSP from districts that were willing to loan them to the department for a period of time. The department presently has such examples with teachers who are serving as Reading Coaches. Additionally, the department has other personnel who are working cooperatively through other forms such as Inter-Governmental Loans. The department pays the district salary and benefit costs for these people. It is possible that the department may also secure professionals from other governmental agencies or private sector companies.

### 3. Retirees

There is legislation that permits retirees to work for the department and to continue to draw their pension payments. Professionals in this category would work as the present legislation permits, with the exception of those deemed by the Commissioner to be a category of extraordinary need resulting in their employment eligibility for two additional years. It is anticipated that these retirees would work for approximately 75% of the

established salary for the role of HSP, as the simultaneous eligibility for pension payment would enhance the compensation package. It is anticipated that this group would be the largest of the three categories of Highly Skilled Professionals.

Highly Skilled Professionals will provide considerable expertise to the Department of Education and do so in ways that the conventional staffing patterns in state government could not begin to approach. Professionals would be sought to enable the department to provide the human resources necessary to meet the needs of districts and schools. It is possible that districts might independently seek support and/or assistance, thus creating another service and use of the HSP. Part of the planning with respect to cost containment is focused on the level of intervention.

In instances of maximum intervention, partial, or full state control, the district would pay the majority of the cost, but not all of it, for the HSPs since it can be reasonably assumed that there has been sufficient warning, or time provided to correct the problems. Assigning payment for the HSP to the district provides additional incentives for the desired improvement, enabling fiscal resources to be directly returned to or used by the district.

### **Transition from Current Monitoring System to NJ QSAC**

To successfully transition the current system to NJ QSAC, an implementation schedule would be assigned for conducting the evaluation of school districts. The schedule would be implemented in differing approaches for two distinct groups of districts. The first group would be districts where recent monitoring (Level I) has occurred and the evidence suggests that no or minimal problems exist because these districts are in the high-performing category. The second group would be districts that are either under full state control; are in Level II or III from the previous monitoring system; or have significant problems as indicated by the district's status relative to federal requirements, or other indicators of low and/or unacceptable performance as evidenced by state statutory/regulatory requirements.

#### **Level I**

The same monitoring schedule would be followed as in the previous iteration of the Department of Education supervision of district effectiveness or quality. The County Offices and the Regional Offices would be the primary agents of this work.

## Level II, III & State Control

Previous audit reports will be reviewed and used as a frame of reference to determine progress in achieving goals. Monitoring teams consisting primarily of Highly Skilled Professionals would be immediately established and sent into the three State-Operated School Districts and the five currently identified districts in Level II for the purpose of re-evaluation and/or provision of technical assistance. The re-evaluation would be based on the newly adopted standards in the five components of the effectiveness. It is expected that this evaluation would be completed within 45 days and the report would be provided to the district within 15 days of the completion of the re-evaluation along with a recommendation in terms of placement on the NJ QSAC continuum. The district would have thirty days to appeal the placement decision to the Commissioner. The Commissioner would then make a recommendation to the State Board of Education if the status of the district would require either partial or full state control. As the continuum provides, partial state control could be required in up to four of the five components of effectiveness based upon identified deficiencies. Deficiencies in five components of effectiveness would require a full state control recommendation. The restoration of local control is a critical decision and comments from the public will be sought on the evaluation after the report has been completed.

The implementation of NJ QSAC means that the status of the three state takeover districts, and the five Level II districts could change within 60-90 days of implementation of this system. In changing to partial state takeover, the three state takeover districts may have to return to local control re-established in the components of effectiveness where it has been determined that they meet the standards. As an example, the district could return to local control in operations and finance but still remain in state control for personnel, instruction and program, and governance. The same outcome could be the result of re-evaluating the Level II districts. In the components where state control was deemed necessary, the monitoring report would indicate where the problems existed, so some timetable for successful intervention could be speculated.

If one or more of the state-operated school districts were to successfully meet the standards for Governance, the following would be the requirements after the return to local control:

- After a three-year period from the time of return to local control, the community would select, by public vote, which type of board would serve the district. Options would include: 1) all publicly elected members; 2) all members appointed by the mayor; 3) a hybrid of elected and appointed members; or 4) a Department of Education approved configuration as submitted by community

agencies and approved by the Commissioner of Education after consultation with the board of education, mayor and council, and through at least one open community meeting. Additionally, there will be a requirement for the district to engage positively and productively, the school community in preparation for the vote and for local control of governance.

- The Board of Education would immediately make decisions as other local boards do with respect to the contract of the present superintendent. They could extend the current contract, provide eighteen months notice to modify the current contract, or permit the current contract to expire in it's agreed upon timeframe with the appropriate statutory notice of renewal or termination.

If one of the districts in Level II were to be found to be deficient in Governance, the Commissioner may provide a person or persons who shall have oversight authority over the functions of either the Superintendent, the board of education, or both. Should the Superintendent's position be vacant, the Commissioner may appoint an interim Superintendent for either a specified time, or for the duration of state control of governance. Should a district be in full state takeover status, the same approach would be used to modify and/or fill positions of leadership providing oversight for all of the components of effectiveness.

In the event that a district is neither in Level II, nor a state takeover district, there may be a need for a monitoring team to immediately begin an evaluation on an emergent basis due to deficiencies in federal requirements and/or deficient other factors. Such evaluations would follow the same approach used for state takeover or Level II would be used, if it is determined that partial state control is warranted in one or more of the components of effectiveness.

Finally, it is essential that all districts understand that being placed in partial state control for one or more of the elements does not necessarily mean that all interventions on the NJ QSAC continuum are progressive. Indicators requiring attention and/or emergent incidents, or problems may necessitate partial state control in affected areas without previous warnings, or development of, and implementation of previous corrective action plans. It is expected that such occurrences would be the exception and not the rule.